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Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding Senate Bill 842.

The intention of the bill is clearly to measure literacy skills in order to assist students in meeting Michigan's grade level standards. However, there are aspects of this proposed legislation which are punitive rather than supportive of the children we serve and in fact do not result in increased student achievement.

Prior to my Superintendency, I spent many years as a Language Arts Consultant. My responsibility was to individually test students demonstrating difficulty with reading, provide a diagnosis and a remedial reading plan. I tested hundreds of children and not once did I find a child where retention would be a solution to improving their achievement level or support them in their struggle to read. I base this statement on professional experience and the follow up of elementary and middle school children with reading deficits. In most cases, there were a variety of factors impacting children ability to meet literary standards – at risk children – individual differences, rates of learning – none of which would be resolved by holding the student back. Children respond to being in a supportive environment, intense intervention strategies with the support of home, and school. We cannot all expect students respond to the arbitrary timelines of third grade.

There is a great deal of research on student retention. Allow me to share some of this research with you. All major educational research and testing organizations oppose using test results as the sole criteria for retention of children. In fact, there are few issues about which there is such powerful consensus among professionals. Any decisions about a student's continued education such as retention should include information beyond a test. What should be considered is teacher observation, class room performance, maturity level and attitude along with a myriad of other information about the child.

What we do know is that low performing students that are retained in primary grades lose ground both academically and socially relative to similar students who are promoted. Retention does not increase learning readiness and gains made during the repeated year fade over time. Retention is associated with significant increases in behavior problems with these problems becoming more pronounced as children grow older.

Clearly, retention can actually produce negative results for children, which I know is not the intention of this committee. In a few studies reporting positive outcomes for retention the gains disappear several years later and retained students fell behind again. This does not support the committee's goal of assisting students to meet tougher graduation requirements. Research also suggests that children who are retained are more likely to drop out and less likely to attend post high school programs. As a matter of fact, retention has been identified as the single most powerful predictor of students dropping out. It is not a predictor of student success. The fact is that although retention is widely practiced, it does not help children "catch up".

Social promotion without academic support is also not a good solution but retention is worse. Retention can damage a child's self esteem. More importantly research shows it doesn't help a child achieve.

Superintendents of Tri-County Alliance are opposed to the use of grade retention as a remedy for a student's reading deficit. While recent trends favor the use of retention as an attempt to maintain high academic standards and educational accountability, it is an ineffective and expensive strategy, with a number of side effects including the likelihood of dropping out, emotional distress and behavior problems.

What we need to do is move beyond social promotion and retention by providing the resources to develop and adopt alternative intervention strategies that are student specific, proven successful and cost effective.

We agree that alternative and intensive remediation strategies should be implemented to bring under-achieving students up to standard. Such strategies could include, but are not limited to, early identification of and targeted assistance for low-achieving students, access to universal pre-school, more attention in this state to early childhood education, individualized student instruction, parental involvement, curriculum development, school restructuring, summer school, and personalized tutoring programs and smaller class sizes. As a matter of fact research shows effective preschool programs increase a student's performance in high school and increase test scores.

Tri-County Alliance would urge this committee to reconsider this proposed legislation. Retention increases costs in a time when fewer dollars are available for education and districts are forced to eliminate the very support services that would make a difference. But, more importantly it does not serve the children and families of this state.

Research I have referenced comes from a number of well known and highly respected universities and educational organizations too numerous to list. However, it is available for your review.

Thank you!

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